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ABSTRACT

The conventional nature of school-sponsored writing, in which writing becomes a formal operant within the closed space of classroom signifying practices, is one in which the feminine mode of expression often announces it cannot play. While the masculine style of peer-response to student writing is largely aggressive, the feminine is conceptually different in its social, feel-good acknowledgement of the writer's effort. While the masculine demands or orders exactly what should be done, the feminine reflects self-consciousness and self-correction. Furthermore, masculine insult and vulgarity contrast with feminine politeness strategies. Strong stylistic and epistemological differences cast doubt on the possibility of "translation" between the genders. It has been observed that when confronted with masculine argumentation, the historical role of women is mimicry. The feminine style of less task-serious play and emotion ruptures the structure of the writing classroom. Only when education goes out of the bounds of the classroom is it possible to speak with the grammar of its shaping ideology, insisting on the legitimacy and variety of ways of being, speaking, and knowing that traditional education proscribes. In the meantime, a dismantling of masculinist pedagogy could begin with the notion of the evaluative criteria guiding peer-response sessions which turn discussing into judging, narrowing the focus of writing to the text as replicable model to be done right, rather than expanding it into the speculative, imaginative realms of discourse, for which there are no checklists. (Seventeen references are attached.) (SG)

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One of the Things at Stake in the Peer-Group Conference: The Feminine

Paper Delivered at 1991 CCCC
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There is a basic problem in the composition classroom which allows the peer-response conference to structure itself as almost a gender parody. Moffett (1968) put his finger on this flaw in his early description of why peer-response has to be included in the curriculum:

> Ideally, a student would write because he was intent on saying something for real reasons of his own and because he wanted to get certain effects on a definite audience. He would write only authentic kinds of discourse such as exist outside of school. A maximum amount of feedback would be provided him in the form of audience response. That is, his writing would be read and discussed by this audience, who would also be the coaches. This response would be candid and specific. Adjustments in language, form, and content would come as the writer's response to his audience's response. Thus instruction would always be individual, relevant, and timely (193).

Since, as teachers, we concede (however rightly) the impossibility of that ideal world, in which students "say something for real reasons," we feel the need to fabricate the next-best alternative--giving them role-playing cases to serve as contexts for their writing, a small peer-group "community" in which their work will be read, and lists of evaluative criteria to use in framing their response to a "community" member's "published" prose. But we can't expect that simulacra will be strong enough to promote the kind of positive personality growth a peer-group enthusiast like Beaven (1977) assumes. If we do, there may be implications, growth in directions we find depressingly common in our culture. Annexing our students' writing task from social reality makes the "task/social" gender-determined spilt (identified by a host of sociolinguistic studies) a compelling hook on which to hang a reading of peer-response transcripts, for peer-response presumes task-orientation as a kind of Gricean Maxim. Some students, I submit, those I will call masculine, have no real strong objection to writing as simulation, because of a heightened task-orientation. Other students, whom I'll call feminine, refuse the gesture finally, because their experience and consciousness position them differently in the world.

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A brief interchange between two students shows this basic split. Andy wrote a paper about how tough high school was for him, partly due to his parents' divorce at the time. Jen begins the discussion:

Jen: Okay, I just had one question that you might want to think about when constructing your final [draft]. How did a.) this divorce, and b.) the school hinder your education?

Andy: Where do you think it needs work?

Jen: I think you need to be a little more descriptive. I really want to know about your teacher. Describe her, describe the scene in the morning of your mom and the divorce. Maybe also even how depressed you got. Show us about you sitting in your room all day staring at the wall.

Andy: Do you think that you could give me some help on seeing a deeper subject?

Jen: What of a deeper subject? You mean starting over? What? Oh Andy, am I not making sense?

Andy: No.

Andy's teacher wasn't happy with the draft of his paper, so Andy is counting on his group to be able to tell him that he should change X, Y, and Z to improve his grade. But Jen doesn't know from good grades (in an earlier discussion of why writing was hard for her, Jen said, "There's a real fear of being accepted. Off the wall, I need to learn that nothing, including writing, is perfect."); instead, she knows from people and divorce and teachers hindering a student, and Mom in the morning, and sitting in a room all day, depressed, staring at the wall. She is in her version of the world of Andy's paper. But Andy doesn't have time for that world now, if he ever would; he wants a good grade on this paper. Jen writes even more to try and repair her meaning for Andy, as Fishman (1978) noted was typical of women in small groups, but Andy just doesn't speak the language. Conversely, Jen can't get the world-oriented commentary she wants from Andy: "I need some suggestions," she says. "Does it flow? Can we establish where I am? Can you feel inner city Milwaukee, the freedom? I don't think so. It's important for me to establish the scene because later I move to suburban racist close-minded hell and all movement growth and education is stifled." Andy's reply patronizes that deeply-felt need: "I confess I didn't understand your paper at all, but what I did understand was good, it just needs a lot of structuring and sorting out." When Jessie's paper on how much she skipped in high school is being discussed, Jen is interested in the lived reality of her story: "How did you get around the system? Did you ever get busted?" Andy, however, has more practical wisdom:

> Jessie, you might be able to talk about how you didn't learn in school but what you learned from skipping, and use Malcolm [X--whose autobiography they

were reading at the time] as an example, how he didn't go to school, but did learn something. Plugging the book will earn you some brownie points, too!

"Tell about how skipping was so easy," he says to Jessie later, "but busting your ass making up for it is going to be hard." Andy knows just the kind of "difficult moral lesson learned" paper a writing teacher wants to see. "Just pick a subject that disturbed you," Andy tells Lori when she's having trouble writing her critique of Allan Bloom, "they are the easiest to write on." "I can't tell my feelings about the book because they changed every other chapter," Melissa moans. "So make something up," Kevin suggests. Kevin was indeed adept at making something up: he wrote the kind of "Malcolm X's Struggle" paper he felt his teacher wanted to read, but confided to his conference group that he thought "Malcolm was fucked in the head." This is the writing formation of canny students, who have learned the benefit of a strong task-orientation.

School-sponsored writing functions according to the local criteria set down by the teacher in the classroom. The masculine view has no problem with that ground rule. Time and again the masculine style was verified as the one conducive to task. "So how do I go about changing it for the better?" George asks, even after he has received much positive general feedback on his paper, and three very specific suggestions (all couched, unfortunately, in "maybe" terms) from two women in the group. Another time, after his group again compliments him on a great job, he complains, "You still didn't tell me diddly!" Pleasant talk and tentative suggestions are not something George can read; he wants a straight, direct, itemized checklist, the kind of checklist someone like Bruffee (1973) provides "to help students learn the evaluative process," guiding students' commentary with question-prompts like "What is the 'point' of the paper? How does it make its point? Is the paper related to any issue raised so far in this course? What are the strong and weak points in the paper?" (638n). The commentary George offers other writers corresponds to that locus of identifiable features. He remembers that the teacher said the opening sentence should be the thesis sentence of the descriptive paragraphs they're working on, so he stubbornly follows through this agenda during his group's discussion of Chris's paper: "You never stayed with what you started. . . Opening sentence should have been on something about your whole room. . . Try to narrow your focus. . . By narrowing your opening LINE! . . . But he still will need a new opening line." The dimensions he can think in need to have been clearly spelled out. Diane illustrates an example of a more feminine response, one not dead-set on a task-oriented agenda, one willing to read a paper and enter into its world, offering

possibilities as they occur to her: "Maybe you ought to leave out the first sentences and start in with your senior year only. . . Talk more about your feelings and hope, excitement. That would maybe put the reader in a mood where you were once at. . . Maybe do a compare/contrast with you and Scott. . . So then expand on how you or anyone else can win an MVP award and not have to be Joe Pro. . . I like the paper a lot." A feminine response, I feel from reading my students' conference transcripts, is one which is open to the paper as--to use Bathes' (1977) distinction--text, as "social space" (164), rather than as mere work, as "the object of a consumption," judged on its "'quality'" (161). There is a definite open, playful quality in the feminine response in these peer-group conferences. "I actually learned how to drive a stick shift from this description!" Diane says about Chris's paper on drag racing. Call it phatic, it is simply not the response of judging or evaluating, but rather of showing how the writing was received.

The conventional nature of school-sponsored writing, in which writing becomes a formal operant within the closed space of classroom signifying practices, is one which the feminine often announces it cannot play. "I HATE WRITING, I'M VERY SCARED OF IT!!!!!" says Lori. "I can't write endings, so don't ask me," Diane chimes in when the group decides Jim's conclusion is too "vague" (George's comment). "I have NO IDEA how I'm going to do this," says Sara, "I'm completely confused. I don't know about the theme, I'm not very good with themes." And Melissa informs her group, "I thought everyone's paper was great considering how hard it was to write. I still think I did mine wrong." Jeana has to introduce a tentative suggestion with, "I am no expert but . . ." and then later tells a male writer, "You seemed to use some more complicated words than I'm used to." There were many instances of commentary dealing with what I labeled "writer uncertainty," among feminine writers, hardly any of "writer authority"; those figures were reversed for the masculine writers. As seen by the tenacious tone of George's remarks above, the conventional game is one masculine writers relish. There is a gusto in the way they announce their readiness to have their paper's discussed: "So which one do we want to rip apart first?" Joe asks, like a young boy looking at all his presents on Christmas morning. "Go ahead," invites Todd, when it's his paper's turn to be discussed, "butch it up." The masculine talk of peer-response, I found, is "butching it up" to a large extent, styled in aggressive, ultra-masculine drag. The person whose paper will be discussed is called "next victim," and the masculine stoically stares down his turn at feedback, (Dirty Harry's "Go ahead, make my day," or Gary Gilmore's last words, "Let's do it!") while more than one feminine student asked

"Be nice." With the conference styled according to the rules of a game, commentary becomes picking apart, running down the evaluative checklist until the points are found and made and scored; at game's end, the writing gets "better" or "more effective," the structured goal of the curriculum in which peer-response functions. The "Gee I really liked your paper," brand of pleasant, social, feel-good acknowledgement seems a move of no apparent value. The feminine response traverses the paper to wander, flaneur-like, through its geography. The feminine respondents, then, had far more instances of text- and paragraph-level commentary than did the masculine, whose remarks were usually on the sentence-level. The masculine impulse wants to get right to the heart, no nonsense; it's writing under the sign of Orkin: locate bugs and exterminate. Such a conceptual difference is akin to Barthes' (1982) observation on Japanese vs. Western cuisine. The chopstick, he notes,

> has a deictic function: it points to the food, designates the fragment . . . introduces into the use of food not an order but a caprice, a certain indolence: in any case, an intelligent and no longer mechanical operation . . . [T]he chopsticks . . . separate, part, peck, instead of cutting and piercing, in the manner of our implements; they never violate the foodstuff: . . . they gradually unravel it . . . thereby rediscovering the natural fissures of the substance. (16, 18).

A willingness or ability to play the game is complicated by the way the players often speak a different language. The feminine players of peer-response use a style that marks them as questionable contestants when compared to the masculine. Some features can be briefly catalogued: More incidence in masculine writers of metatask or task-styling comments. The repeated use of "oops" and "sorry" in the feminine; the constant hedging of "maybe," when the masculine demands or orders exactly what should be done to make the writing better. A heightened sense of self-consciousness in feminine commentary ("Oh Andy, am I not making sense?"), and the need for self-correction. The feminine tendency toward prolixity, as seen in Jen above, which a masculine writer, used to one-shot comments like "vague," can't decipher. Speaking of which, masculine students speak more often in those sorts of hollow words, identified by Sommers (1982) in her work on response to student writing as all too prevalent in teacher commentary. More instances of politeness strategies among the feminine, but less instances of insults or face-threatening commentary. The ritual insult for masculine speakers is the feminine: When George is acting too cranky in a conference, Chris asks him if he has "pms?" The general absence of vulgarity in feminine speech, which the masculine speaker uses often,

and to which the feminine can either conform ("I know, fag," says Julie, to fend off one of Kevin's criticisms, knowing it will give her a luster of toughness) or register disapproval (When a discussion of Jim's paper on the emotions of a soccer player leads to gross talk about "the fear of getting hit in the gonads," Diane has to present herself as shocked: "Enough is enough, kiddies," she says, and George responds to her by saying, "Thanx MOM").

Penelope (Stanley) & Wolfe (1983) have tried to catalogue some of the actual prose features which determine feminine style. Overall, they feel, the feminine style reflects "an epistemology that perceives the world in terms of ambiguities, pluralities, processes, continuities, and complex relationships" (126), qualities observable to a degree in some of the excerpts above. Penelope (Stanley) & Wolfe see feminine syntax as markedly different in its associativity, its jumble of words, its non-linearity, its fusing of temporalities, its fragments, its questions that turn into statements (and vice-versa), and its sense of vulnerable self-consciousness which reads like one is talking to oneself. I think here again of Jen, who is often characterized by her fellow group-mates as too jumbled to understand.

Jen: To me what you're saying in your paper is you agree with a lot of what Bloom says, but you find it too subjective. Your introduction, which I think sounds really good, doesn't have anything yet to do with your paper. You're disagreeing, not just about how subjective it is. I think we all gotta get past the subjective stuff, you know what I mean?

Andy: Who is she talking to?

Jen: I think that's okay. I think we just need to analyze the information more maybe. Like maybe look deeper than the words. Do you think we should look at this as a whole, maybe? Not in pieces. You know what I mean, to make it as a critique. . . . What do you guys think? Or maybe we shouldn't talk about it. Do you guys want to? Nay or yea?

Lori: About what?

Strong stylistic and epistemological differences should make us suspicious that an unproblematic "translation" (to use Bruffee's term, which he borrows from Kuhn) between the genders' languages can occur. Michelle can give no real commentary about Paul's paper because, as she confesses, she has no idea how the male passion for motorcycles works; Kristen confesses she can't understand Jerald's analysis of Miller Lite commercials because she's unfamiliar with them; Vikki has to interrupt a very lively discussion of sports-related writing to ask what various terms like "parity" and "wild-card spots" mean; Diane can't give any helpful commentary

to Bart regarding his loving recollection of the old Met Stadium; George doesn't exactly feel inadequate to the task of helping Diane, just discouraged, when he can't comment on her paper in which she describes all the good-looking guys she saw at the beach one day: "I was disappointed that you talked about MEN. What about the girls!" Based on an earlier study (Sirc, 1989), I was not surprised to find that, in the peer-response sessions on narrative papers, the masculine writers chose self-aggrandizing topics; what was interesting here was how such topics caused a percentage of the conference talk to result in self-serving praise from group-members, like "Congratulations on winning the MVP trophy, sounds like you deserved it!" When inter-gender translation does occur, it's in favor of the dominant. Debbie looks forward to a brainstorming discussion of "60 Minutes," her favorite show, but almost as soon as she registers herself as a fan ("Most of the '60 Minutes' programs I've watched are pretty good. I think the cast asks questions I might ask."), she has to deal with Blane, a brash young man who proceeds to savage her show: "HOW CAN YOU BE AN EXPERT ON 3 SUBJECTS WEEK TO WEEK[?]"; "[IT'S A] NEWS MAGAZINE THAT GLORIFIES ITS REPORTERS." It is Debbie who has to try and come around to understand Blane's point of view. She patiently asks him to define and explain, but after hearing a litany of abuse--"THEY SLANT THINGS IN AN UNPRODUCTIVE WAY," "CANCEL THE SHOW," "IN THE MIND OF THE IGNORAMUS, THEY'RE THE BEST"--turn even uglier, when another one of her favorite shows, "Phil Donahue," is characterized by Blane as featuring "GAYS WEIRDOS AND OTHER THINGS LADIES GOSSIP ABOUT,", she not only gives up, but she starts insulting Blane's heroes: Larry King she calls "a transvestite"; George Will is "gay"; and William Buckley is a "fag." Debbie has been conquered linguistically, she resorts to malespeak. Bruffean translation, then, may be a one-way street; the historical role of women, says Irigaray (1985), is mimicry.

These people are living in two worlds which occasionally coincide but which just as often don't. Hence, though there may be times when collaboration works as well as advertised, times when gender is not so prominent, there are certainly those other times, times which may form the ambient background, when determinants like gender will not be so transparent. Those will be times of conflict, incomprehension, submission. Which is unavoidable, perhaps: meaning being a constant struggle over fixing interpretations. But when one's meanings are being systematically ignored, devalued, questioned; when the rules of the game are such that one team is favored, and difference is either denied, degraded, or absorbed into the larger game (Michelle, who wrote often about hockey, was deemed the best writer in her class

because she was seen as "androgynous"), then there are structural problems which must be addressed. I think that is precisely what is happening to the feminine, as difference, in the contemporary composition classroom, and why peer-response conferences will always yield results like I have been discussing, when difference is insisted upon rather than denied in the reading of those conferences. Students will always realize what the task is in peer-response and which style is best suited for that task; they will either choose to "butch it up" into the ultra-masculine, fiercely eager respondent who can hardly wait to tear into a paper, or they will preserve their other identities, with all the concomitant translation problems therein.

It's ultimately, I think, a question regarding the concepts of pleasure, charm, and text-seduction vs. those of efficiency, evaluation, and text-production. Pleasure has no place in the curriculum of efficiency. The feminine style of less task-serious play and emotion ruptures, perhaps, the structure of the writing classroom, those four walls which inscribe the student into our criteria-based definition of what writing is, criteria which inform students of what they should talk about when they talk about writing. Bruffee admits no one's agenda but the syllabus's in his desire "to insure coherent, uninterrupted consideration of the subject matter during the balance of the term" (639). Coherence is a specious goal, though, in the age of pastiche. Our classrooms are not the homogeneous sites peer-response theorists believe them to be. Walls have a way of falling down, the repressed has a way of returning, and students have a way of disinventing the university. The basic ideal underlying Moffett's earlier rationale for peer response was a wall-less one and perhaps too lovely to exist. Peer-response, as institutionalized in the literature and our classrooms, only shows what a pale parody we have made of that dream. By replacing the dream with carefully limited opportunities for (and forms of) writing, we reduce Moffett's "universe of discourse" to a small cubicle--say, about the size of a men's toilet stall, on the walls of which tired gender roles reproduce themselves. I chose that image consciously, remembering the joke with which one of my peer-response groups began their session, a joke I later read again in one of the campus men's rooms:

Damon: Hey you guys, what's the difference between a bitch and a slut?
Andrew: ?
Erik: I give up
Damon: A slut will fuck everybody, a bitch will fuck everyone but you

A comparable feminine-marked joke was nowhere seen in my transcripts.

Peer evaluation, as a ritual enaction of dominance, centered on finding the "strong and weak points" in order to produce "strong" texts, may simply suit conventional masculinity. Hillocks cites (1986: 159) a study which reports that boys showed greater gains in peer evaluation treatments than in teacher lecture or group tutoring. Such a study, I might add, is rare, as the literature relating to the theory and research of peer-response is almost wholly underdetermined regarding gender. And Delpit (1988) seriously questions the ability of the peer-conference to produce positive changes in the writing of another group of marginalized students, African-Americans. Collaborative teamwork, which peer-response advocates support unquestioningly, for Lyotard "is especially successful in improving performativity within the framework of a given model, that is, for the *implementation* of a task. Its advantages seem less certain when the need is to 'imagine' new models, in other words, on the level of their *conception*" (1984: 52-53, emphasis mine). 'New models,' though, seem an appropriate goal for a writing course.

Peer-response serves our curricular system, and as such it is subject to the failure of every system, which, to perform its end, must reduce complexity. The "coherence" (638) Bruffee wants to create in the class means dissolving difference. True collective educational activity appears as a counter-discourse, responding to bureaucratic structures which perpetuate the status quo. Masculine writers, who can do Bruffeean collaboration around points to be made and grades to be won, work well within the parameters of the occupying powers; they are true collaborationists. The feminine style is an underground or subcultural style. It admits a powerlessness on one level ("I'm not very good with themes"), but it blithely assumes a power, a certitude, a conviction about one's values. I hope we do not want to make of the teaching of writing "a problem of assimilation to the already known, the already written" (Owens, 1983: 62). Rather, I favor the view of Lyotard (1978), who does not abandon the ideal as easily as Moffett, but rather affirms, in this case, the possibility that masculine bodies can be open to difference,

> that the so-called feminine components of pleasure . . . can freely play on bodies whose armor shields them from death . . . Let us free him instead from his armor of words and death; let us temper him in a large *patchwork* of affective elements that must be intensified. One should not attack him head-on but wage a guerrilla war of skirmishes and raids in a space and time other than those imposed for millenia by the masculine logos. (13-14)

Kristeva speaks of "the excesses of the languages whose very multiple is the only sign of life" (1986: 300), and we would argue for conceptions of texts and

classroom interaction which preserve that behavior, opening out into heterogeneity, a million maybe's, rather than closing on a (privileged) style or system, like the one which legitimates Blane's speech; indeed, which makes it inevitable. When we go out of the bounds of a classroom which can only speak with the grammar of its shaping ideology, insisting on the legitimacy and variety of ways of being and speaking and knowing that the dimensions of that room proscribes, then peer-response may do what its advocates claim. Only then can it offer a space of freedom in which to discuss and shape new, previously unpresentable meaning. Otherwise there will always be the warriors and the outcasts--the brutal inexorability of task, surrounded by chatter.

In light of my students' performance in peer-conferences, and heeding Kristeva's calls for a "ruthless and irreverent dismantling of the workings of discourse, thought, and existence" (299), I humbly suggest that such a dismantling of a masculinist pedagogy begin with the notion of the evaluative criteria guiding peer-response sessions, a mechanism which turns discussing into judging, narrowing the focus of writing to the text as replicable model to be done right, rather than expanding it into the speculative, imaginative realms of discourse, for which there are no checklists. "From ancient times," says Hillocks "those concerned with teaching oral or written composition have taught their students criteria for judging effective discourse." Such a burden of history would appear to rationalize the use of (in Hillocks' words) "various properties of good writing," which have been "established by consensus," to guide students' written language production. Thus we legitimate some and delegitimate other kinds of writing, as well as the discourses used to talk about that writing. Wiener (1986), in fact, sees the "rare opportunity" presented by the peer-conference as one geared to standards:

> By advancing collaborative learning as a productive instructional mode . . . English teachers have a rare opportunity to evolve a set of standards by which to judge classroom performance in the new paradigm. Our first obligation is to define for ourselves what we see as efficient classroom models for collaborative learning. Our next obligation is to pass on to beginners the standards by which we measure our own performances so that new teachers seeking membership in this intellectual community have a clear paradigm to study. And, finally, we are obliged to lay out for classroom observers what to look for as hallmarks of collaboration so that any judgments evaluators make about teaching performance are judgments our community has justified through thoughtful, disciplined discussion. (53-54)

Wiener's description of the collaborative classroom, delineated along the lines of evaluation and devoid of actual students, recalls Lyotard's characterization of any system guided by efficient performativity, as "a vanguard machine dragging humanity after it, dehumanizing it in order to rehumanize it at a different level of normative capacity" (1984: 63). Peer-response is performance-based, under a carefully constructed notion of what defines "productive." The students I learned to admire most in my transcripts were the students who used their peer-groups as a time to make a social meaning more important than my writing tasks might otherwise have allowed, who furthered their own agendas and connections with the world. It's not up to them to enter my rarified realm of writing, it's up to me to make writing part of their world. I offer this crude, initial exploration of classroom dialogue in the spirit and hope of a different classroom, one inhabited by teachers who haven't let either nostalgia for lost narratives or the cynical savviness which sees through the ideal subsume their impulse for the true and the just.

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